

The New York Times

Where Coughlin First Laid Down the Law

By [Sam Borden](#)

Feb. 2, 2012

INDIANAPOLIS — At some point during the telecast of Sunday's Super Bowl, the cameras will almost surely cut to a close-up of Giants Coach Tom Coughlin — his face red and his frustration evident — as he upbraids an unlucky player after a poor tackle or a missed assignment.

Coughlin's intensity is famous. Announcers talk about it, fans laugh about it and players endure it, mostly because they realize it is genuine. Coughlin, the players say, is nothing if not consistent: the clocks have always been set five minutes fast at the Giants' training facility, the road dress code has always been backed up by fines for noncompliance and the practice schedules have always been planned down to the very last second of the water breaks.

"You can't have a problem with it," tight end Jake Ballard said, "because it's been that way for a long time."

A very, very long time, actually, going all the way back to Coughlin's first head coaching job at Rochester Institute of Technology — a medium-size college in upstate New York where students can occasionally be seen wearing T-shirts bragging about how the football team is "undefeated since 1978," one year after the program was officially disbanded.

As the university's first varsity football coach, Coughlin — who grew up in Waterloo, N.Y., about an hour from R.I.T.'s campus — led the Tigers from 1970 to 1973. Although the program survived just four more seasons, a look back at Coughlin's tenure shows that the most enduring part of the team's short-lived existence may well be its most famous coach's philosophy.

“When I see him on TV,” said Mark McCabe, a former linebacker and defensive end under Coughlin, “he hasn’t changed at all. I’ll bet if the Giants heard all the things he said and did to us, they’d think it sounded real familiar.”



Tom Coughlin, second from right, was Rochester Institute of Technology's first varsity football coach, from 1970-73. Credit...Rochester Institute of Technology Sports Information

How could they not? Even at 24, Coughlin was maniacal when it came to the tiniest of details. McCabe provided a variety of team documents from Coughlin’s time at R.I.T. to The New York Times, and the similarities between Coughlin then and Coughlin now are striking. Players at R.I.T. were required to dress in jackets and ties on all trips, even for a preseason scrimmage played at Alfred University, little more than a 90-minute bus ride away. On a memo about spring practice in 1973, Coughlin laid out a schedule for his players that included instructions like “Pick up a helmet” at 9 a.m. and “dress in shorts, T-shirt, shoes” by 9:30 a.m.

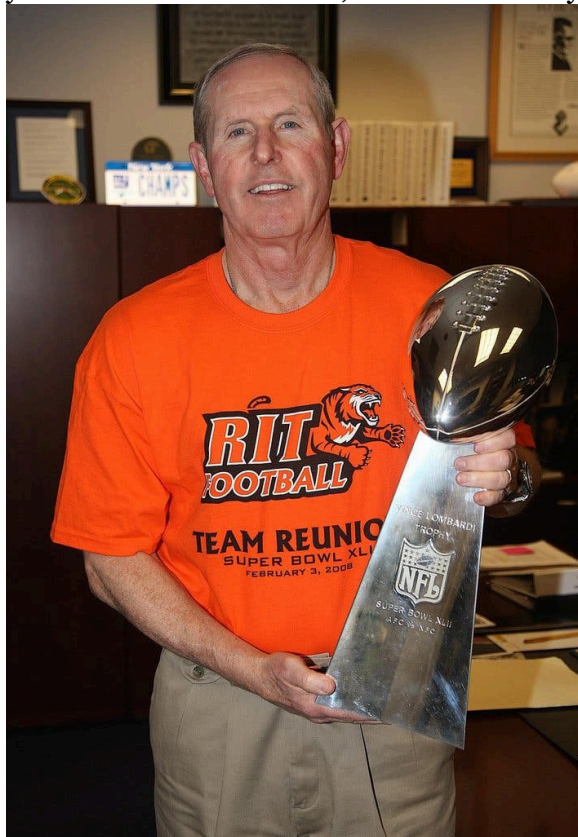
In handwritten notes that accompanied the printed schedules, incoming players — who were joining a varsity program that had existed for all of two seasons at that point — were asked, “Are you interested in doing those things that are necessary to rise above mediocrity?”

Coughlin also provided the players — who may or may not have been excited about the prospect of a rigorous regimen — five bullet-point reasons the extra training was important, including: “Our opponents may or may not be involved in an off-season program. We want to provide ourselves with the winning edge. We are never satisfied!!”

Additionally, Coughlin’s love of motivational techniques seems to have grown at R.I.T. Numerous times this season, several Giants players said, Coughlin invoked the words of Winston Churchill during pregame speeches; three decades ago, according to McCabe, Coughlin sat the players down before a game and played a tape recording of a message from Gen. George S. Patton to his troops. He also constantly reminded the R.I.T. players of “our motto: If you are going to wear the pads, use every ounce of energy to be the best possible football player.”

Of course, since this was the 1970s, the players wore the pads often. McCabe said the team would often practice three times a day — Coughlin also reminded players to take their salt tablets — which quickly eliminated those who were not fully committed to Coughlin’s methods.

“If we had 100 people coming out for football, by the end of the second week, half of them were gone,” McCabe said. “He didn’t care if you were a great, gifted athlete — if you didn’t want to work, he didn’t want you.”



Tom Coughlin with the Lombardi Trophy from the Giants' 2008 Super Bowl win.
Credit...Rochester Institute of Technology

McCabe added that Coughlin quickly earned the respect of his players because he treated them as if they were professionals even though the trappings of the fledgling program were anything but. Games were played on campus, but there was no stadium with a rising grandstand or press box, just a set of bleachers.

he players practiced at a swampy, overgrown field about a half-mile from the main gym, where they dressed before “warming up” with a run over to the field. Lou Spiotti, the athletic director at R.I.T. and the coach who succeeded Coughlin, said the state of the field — it was in the southeast corner of campus, which was little more than a bog — prompted him to continue a training-camp ritual started by Coughlin.

“During preseason, when we issued uniforms, we also issued insect repellent,” Spiotti said. “That’s how bad the bugs were. It was basically farmland out there. So we had a whole lot of Off! that we gave out to the players.”

Coughlin led the Tigers to a 16-15-2 record in his four seasons before departing to take an assistant coaching job at Syracuse. Four seasons after he left, the university shut down the football program, citing a lack of money. Spiotti said students were crushed, but despite several attempts at reviving the program over the past three decades, football at R.I.T. remains little more than a memory.

A graduate student named R. J. Pollard, however, is seeking to change that, and he cited Coughlin as one of his motivations.

Pollard said that he was leading a group that has garnered student government support in pushing to start a sprint football team, a weight-restricted version of the game formerly called lightweight football that is popular in the Northeast. Cornell, Army, Navy and Pennsylvania are among the eight universities currently fielding sprint football teams, and Pollard said he believed that was the most realistic avenue for football to return to R.I.T.

Image



Tom Coughlin as coach at Rochester Institute of Technology. A former player said, “if you didn't want to work, he didn't want you.”

“People don't realize it, but we have a very interesting football history here,” Pollard said. “We had a team in the 1920s and then it was disbanded, and we had a team with a great coach like Tom Coughlin and then it went away again. I think it's important that we bring football back.”

A segment of R.I.T. alumni appears to be in favor of football's return, and there remains an abiding pride in the program for those few who were a part of it. When the Giants were in the Super Bowl four years ago, McCabe organized a reunion party, where nearly 60 former R.I.T. players, family members and friends watched the game together. When the Giants won, McCabe said, there were cheers and even tears from many in attendance who were ecstatic about Coughlin — one of their own — leading a Super Bowl champion.

This Sunday, when the Giants face the Patriots again, there will not be a similar gathering — “It was just too hard to put together on short notice this time,” McCabe said — but Coughlin's former players will surely be watching closely.

They know that Coughlin treasures them, too. Pete Van Peursem, who played two seasons under Coughlin, recalled attending a Jacksonville Jaguars-Buffalo Bills playoff game in 1996, when Coughlin was coaching the expansion Jaguars.

After the game, Van Peursem talked his way to the tunnel near the Jaguars locker room and clapped Coughlin on the shoulder. Coughlin turned around, looked at Van Peursem — whom he had not seen in more than 20 years — and broke into a wide smile.

“You know what’s funny?” Van Peursem said. “It was great, we were catching up, the whole thing. But as we were talking, I remember looking around at all the players, too.”

Van Peursem laughed.

“They all had short, neat haircuts, no crazy facial hair, and they were all wearing suits,” he said. “And so I thought, ‘Yup, this is Coach Coughlin’s team.’ ”

SUPER BOWL: NEW ENGLAND vs. GIANTS: 6:30 p.m. Sunday

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 3, 2012, Section B, Page 10 of the New York edition with the headline: Where Coughlin First Laid Down the Law. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)